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Report of the Secretary-General on the situation in Abkhazia, Georgia

I. Introduction

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to Security Council resolution 1781 (2007), by which the Council decided to extend the mandate of the United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG) until 15 April 2008. It provides an update of the situation in Abkhazia, Georgia since my report of 3 October 2007 (S/2007/588).

2. My Special Representative, Jean Arnault, continued to lead the Mission. He was assisted by the Chief Military Observer, Major General Niaz Muhammad Khan Khattak (Pakistan). The strength of UNOMIG on 1 January 2008 stood at 133 military observers and 19 police officers (see annex).

II. Political process

3. During the reporting period, UNOMIG continued its efforts to help prevent the escalation of tensions in the zone of conflict and to facilitate dialogue between the Georgian and Abkhaz sides. The overall approach to the settlement of the conflict remains that a successful dialogue on security, the return of internally displaced persons and refugees, economic rehabilitation and humanitarian issues would help bring about a comprehensive political settlement of the conflict, taking into account the principles contained in the document entitled "Basic Principles for the Distribution of Competences between Tbilisi and Sukhumi", its transmittal letter (see S/2002/88, para. 3) and additional ideas by the sides.

4. The Mission followed up with both sides on the understandings recorded during the meeting of the Group of Friends, chaired by the United Nations, held in Bonn, Germany, on 27 and 28 June. These understandings related to the resumption of the Quadripartite Meetings on Security; the investigation into the disappearance of Davit Sigua; implementation of the Rehabilitation Programme in the conflict zone, funded by the European Commission; cooperation on swine fever control; cooperation on missing persons; support for civil society contacts; and preparation of leadership-level meetings (see S/2007/439, paras. 8-14). On 25 October, with the facilitation of UNOMIG, a meeting took place in Sukhumi between David Bakradze, State Minister of Georgia on Conflict Resolution Issues, and Sergei Shamba, Abkhaz de facto Minister for Foreign Affairs. At the meeting, which was prodded by

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the deadly incident in Bokhundjara on 20 September (see S/2007/588, para. 18), the sides agreed on modalities for the release and handing over of the seven Abkhaz detainees, which took place on 27 October with UNOMIG assistance. The sides also announced a preliminary understanding on the holding of meetings on security issues between the two sides, UNOMIG and the Collective Peacekeeping Forces of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). I hope that, on this basis, regular contacts on security issues can start in early 2008.

5. On 21 November, the third session of the Steering Committee of the rehabilitation programme in the zone of conflict took place in the UNOMIG offices in Gali under the chairmanship of the Head of the Delegation of the European Commission to Georgia with the participation of the Georgian Deputy State Minister on Conflicts Resolution Issues, the Abkhaz de facto Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs, the Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General and the Resident Representative of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (see para. 46). In December, the Joint Fact-Finding Group, which is chaired by UNOMIG includes the two sides and the CIS peacekeeping force, held two meetings on the case of disappearance of Davit Sigua (see S/2007/182, para. 15). Altogether, the Joint Fact-Finding Group has held six meetings on the matter since August 2007 (see para. 37). Work on missing persons under the aegis of the International Committee of the Red Cross has slowed as a result of a cabinet reshuffle in Georgia, but is expected to resume after the completion of the electoral process.

6. While some work has been done with regard to the outcome of the Bonn meeting, differences between the sides persisted on the formal political dialogue. The Abkhaz leadership maintained its objections to official dialogue at the political level until the situation created in the upper Kodori Valley by the July 2006 special operation was addressed. The Government of Georgia, on the other hand, reaffirmed that the situation in the upper Kodori Valley was not negotiable. In addition, the Abkhaz side saw in what it described as a continuing Georgian military build-up, including in the upper Kodori Valley, a confirmation of its fears of a possible use of force by the Government of Georgia. In turn, the apprehensions of the Government of Georgia about a possible Abkhaz attack in the Valley have been strengthened by the position, reiterated by Sukhumi, that the upper Kodori Valley is an integral part of Abkhazia and that if this issue is not resolved diplomatically the Abkhaz side might take other measures for its resolution.

7. Internal political developments in Georgia after the events of 7 November in Tbilisi and during the pre-term presidential elections held on 5 January did not mitigate the perceptions of threats described above, quite the contrary. The Abkhaz leadership expressed its concerns that internal problems in Georgia and the electoral dynamics could set the stage for military action in the zone of conflict. In this connection, in early December the Abkhaz side announced a strengthening of security measures along the ceasefire line until mid-January 2008. The Government of Georgia denied harbouring any aggressive intentions and, in turn, interpreted Abkhaz security measures as the introduction of a state of emergency in the Gali district, possibly aimed against the Georgian population in the district. As in the case of the upper Kodori Valley, basic distrust in Tbilisi and Sukhumi as to the intentions of the other side generated actions and reactions that have, in turn, fed growing perceptions of impending threats.

8. In addition, misgivings surrounding the implications of the Kosovo situation have added another dimension to an already tense situation. The Government of Georgia made it clear on several occasions that it took very seriously the scenario of a Russian recognition of Abkhazia depending on the denouement of the current debate on the future status of Kosovo. Following a statement by a Russian ruling party official about possible deliberations in the Russian Duma in January 2008 on an earlier request by the Abkhaz de facto parliament for Russian recognition of Abkhaz independence, Georgian officials stated that the Government would take all necessary measures under the Constitution to protect Georgia's territorial integrity.

9. This adverse political environment was compounded by a large number of allegations concerning military deployment on both sides of the ceasefire line and incidents involving the Abkhaz militia or the CIS peacekeeping force. The Mission investigated them ex officio or at the request of the sides and found most of them baseless or exaggerated. Concerned by this development, on 12 December I issued a public statement appealing to both sides to show restraint, and supported the call made by the Security Council in its resolution 1781 (2007), in which it strongly urged all parties to consider and address seriously each other's legitimate security concerns, to refrain from any acts of violence and provocation, including political action or rhetoric, and to comply fully with previous agreements regarding ceasefire and non-use of violence.

10. Throughout the period under review, my Special Representative maintained regular contact with both sides, as well as the Group of Friends of the Secretary-General both in Tbilisi and in their capitals. In November, he met separately in Tbilisi with Matthew Bryza, United States Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, and Hans Dieter Lucas, Director for Eastern Europe, Central Asia and the Caucasus, German Ministry of Foreign Affairs; in London with Sir Brian Fall, United Kingdom Special Representative for the Southern Caucasus; in Moscow with Sergey V. Lavrov, Russian Minister for Foreign Affairs, and Grigoriy Karasin, State Secretary and Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs; and in Paris with Véronique Bujon-Barré, Deputy Director at the Political Affairs and Security Directorate at the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He also met on several occasions with Peter Semneby, the European Union Special Representative for the Southern Caucasus. The Mission facilitated visits to Sukhumi and/or the zone of conflict by the Ambassadors of France and the United Kingdom and other representatives of the Tbilisi-based Group of Friends, as well as by Mr. Semneby, the Apostolic Nuncio to Georgia and representatives of the delegation of the European Commission to Georgia. My Special Representative took part in a meeting of the senior representatives of the Group of Friends in Oslo on 12 December, which addressed the prevailing situation and the implementation of Security Council resolution 1781 (2007).

III. Developments in the Mission's area of responsibility

Gali sector

11. The overall situation in the Gali sector has been generally calm, with occasional spikes of tension, in particular in connection with the Georgian presidential election. As mentioned earlier, in early December the Abkhaz leadership decided to increase the number of security personnel in the security and restricted

weapons zones, reportedly as a precautionary measure. Through its daily patrols, UNOMIG estimated that despite this increase, the presence of Abkhaz de facto security personnel in the security zone did not exceed 600, as agreed by the sides.

12. Ahead of the presidential election, the Georgian authorities appealed to the international community to ensure that residents of the Gali district were allowed to vote by crossing the ceasefire line to the Zugdidi district. The Abkhaz de facto authorities stated that Gali residents were free to vote in the election but warned that those who wanted to be involved in Georgian political life might be better off staying on the Zugdidi side of the ceasefire line. Such "warnings" had a deterrent effect on participation by Gali residents in the election. Paradoxically, they were also deterred by misinformation by the Georgian media that the ceasefire line would be closed around election time.

13. On 11 October, in the village of Meore Otobaya a boy was killed by a stray anti-personnel mine that he had found on the bank of the river. This was a tragic reminder of the fact that although the Gali district had been cleared of mines by Halo Trust after a nearly nine year-long mine-clearing campaign, stray mines can still pose a threat.

14. On 17 October, an Abkhaz de facto security post commander was killed by Georgian law enforcement officers in Shamgona village, close to the ceasefire line on the Zugdidi side, in what was described as an anti-criminal operation. UNOMIG fact-finding confirmed that it saw no political motive behind the incident.

15. From 30 December to 1 January, two incidents took place in the village of Nabakevi. One involved the beating and arrest of a local resident and the harassment of others by personnel of a nearby Abkhaz security post; the other involved arson of an unoccupied house, reportedly by individuals from the same post. UNOMIG has conveyed to the Abkhaz de facto authorities its concern about these incidents and urged them to conduct a thorough investigation and bring the perpetrators to justice.

16. Criminal incidents reported to UNOMIG patrols during the period under review included one killing, two attempted killings, seven robberies and one abduction, marking a significant decrease from the same period in 2006.

17. Although, compared with the previous period, fewer incidents, criminal or otherwise, affected the security situation in the Gali sector, a widespread sense of uncertainty and alarm was fuelled throughout the period by an almost daily flow of inaccurate reports originating in the Georgian media and, occasionally, by the Georgian authorities themselves. Each individual allegation may have had little impact, but cumulatively they have contributed to growing distrust and insecurity, ultimately increasing the chances of confrontation.

18. The Mission maintained a vigorous pattern of patrolling throughout the Gali district, including a large number of special patrols to verify Georgian press reports and official statements. By and large, these patrols found that the information was sometimes baseless, sometimes only partially correct and, in some cases, misconstrued. This was the case with allegations suggesting the mining of areas close to the ceasefire line; the declaration of a state of emergency in Gali, the deployment there of large Abkhaz forces and the closure of the ceasefire line around the time of the presidential election; the burning of seven houses in the villages of Otobaya, Nabakevi and Tagiloni by Abkhaz forces accompanied by CIS peacekeepers, who allegedly detained eight local Georgian residents; the massive

detention of Gali residents by Abkhaz forces; the vandalizing of road signs in the Georgian language and the burning of Georgian language books in schools by the Abkhaz de facto militia, with the assistance of the CIS peacekeeping force.

19. There were also a growing number of allegations levelled specifically at the CIS peacekeeping force in the Gali sector. After verification by UNOMIG patrols, those allegations, too, proved mostly groundless. This was, in particular, the case for the allegations suggesting: (a) the deployment in Ochamchira in early November of some 200 Russian troops and military hardware, including five tanks, four Grad launchers, five armoured personnel carriers and seven howitzers; (b) the establishment of new CIS peacekeeping force posts; (c) the deployment of anti-aircraft weapons at the CIS peacekeeping force posts and additional heavy weapons; (d) a shoot-out between ethnic Russian and Chechen CIS peacekeepers in Ochamchira, allegedly resulting in six peacekeepers being wounded; and (e) prevention of Gali residents from crossing the ceasefire line by the CIS peacekeeping force, and a deadly shoot-out between CIS peacekeepers on the election day near the Inguri bridge, resulting in two persons being shot dead.

20. The Mission monitored the rotation of the Northern Operational Group of the CIS peacekeeping force during December, involving a total of 1,100 personnel. The Georgian side protested that the rotation had not been coordinated with Tbilisi. The Georgian side also claimed that as part of the rotation, the CIS peacekeeping force introduced additional troops and heavy weapons into the zone of conflict. UNOMIG did not confirm these claims.

21. The Georgian authorities also expressed concern at the presence of ethnic Chechens in the CIS peacekeeping force. UNOMIG has ascertained that since mid-2007 a number of ethnic Chechen soldiers have indeed been included in the CIS peacekeeping force. The leadership of the CIS peacekeeping force has acknowledged this fact while denying that there was any "special Chechen unit". The soldiers, who were previously spread across a number of posts, have now been concentrated in one post in each of the three battalions of the peacekeeping force on both sides of the ceasefire line — two posts on the Gali side and one post on the Zugdidi side. UNOMIG has expressed its view that, given the background of the 1992-1993 conflict, the presence of ethnic Chechen soldiers was bound to hurt the sensitivities of the local population in the zone of conflict and would therefore not enhance trust in the peacekeeping force.

22. The United Nations police continued to liaise with the Abkhaz de facto militia in Gali, Ochamchira and Tqvarcheli districts. They conducted 19 training courses for 229 de facto law enforcement officers in international law enforcement standards, police tactics, suspect apprehension, use of force, weapons handling and other vital policing skills. From 16 to 19 October, a training course in economic crime investigation was held for 25 officers from the de facto Ministry of Interior's economic crime department. From 26 to 28 November, 21 officers from the de facto Interior Ministry's crime investigation department took part in a training programme in modern trends in crime investigation under the auspices of the United Nations. The United Nations police also conducted 38 monitoring visits to local de facto law enforcement facilities. Seven sets of forensic and police tactical equipment were donated to the Abkhaz de facto militia. Six sets of law-related reference books were handed over to the libraries of the de facto local law enforcement agencies.

23. The autumn conscription into the de facto Abkhaz armed forces in the Gali district started in mid-November. While no one has yet been conscripted, the United Nations Human Rights Office in Abkhazia, Georgia, continued to monitor this process, which is unpopular with the local population.

24. The language of instruction in the Gali district schools also remained of concern. In September, the subjects of Abkhaz history, geography and culture — all taught in the Russian language — were introduced in lower Gali schools. The requirement that administrative paperwork be kept in Russian came also into effect in the lower Gali district schools. Records related to disciplines taught in Georgian, however, remained in the Georgian language.

25. In early December the Human Rights Office received complaints related to restrictions of freedom of movement across the ceasefire line for leaders of some local non-governmental organizations. Since late December those restrictions have been lifted.

26. On 10 December, the building of a Human Rights Centre, refurbished with funding from the UNOMIG Trust Fund, was officially opened in Gali. Its opening coincided with the launch of a United Nations system-wide year-long campaign dedicated to the sixtieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and was attended by representatives of UNOMIG, the Tbilisi-based Group of Friends and members of several Gali- and Sukhumi-based non-governmental organizations that founded the Human Rights Centre. The Human Rights Office will assist the Centre in providing legal aid to local residents.

Zugdidi sector

27. The situation in the Zugdidi sector remained calm throughout most of the period under review, but tensions rose dramatically on 30 October during the incident involving the CIS peacekeeping force and the Georgian Ministry of Internal Affairs personnel in the vicinity of the Ganmukhuri Patriotic Youth Camp, close to the ceasefire line. The incident, which followed a number of earlier tense stand-offs around the Camp, involved a heated confrontation between a CIS peacekeeping force patrol and five Ministry of Internal Affairs personnel. The latter were accused by the CIS peacekeeping force of having interfered with the conduct of the patrol, were disarmed, beaten and detained. UNOMIG observers came to the site of the incident, where they made every effort to facilitate the release of the detained Georgian personnel and defuse the tension as both sides brought in re-enforcements, including six BTR armoured personnel carriers and a helicopter on the CIS peacekeeping force side and close to 200 security personnel on the Georgian side. The release was delayed until President Mikheil Saakashvili arrived at the scene and, having seen the severely beaten Ministry of Internal Affairs personnel, he declared General Sergei Chaban, commander of the CIS peacekeeping force, persona non grata. During the incident, two CIS peacekeeping force soldiers were also beaten and a CIS peacekeeping force helicopter was shot at, sustaining minor damage. In the view of UNOMIG, the build-up of forces and emotions during the incident could easily have led to fatalities.

28. From the video footage that was wrested by a Georgian journalist from a CIS peacekeeper, it appears that the CIS peacekeeping force patrol initiated the altercation. Based on the video footage alone it is not clear whether the Georgian personnel had interfered with the patrol as argued by the CIS peacekeeping force.

29. This incident compounded the already tense relationship between the CIS peacekeeping force and the Georgian side. The objections by the Georgian side to free movement of the CIS peacekeeping force in the restricted weapons zone have led the CIS peacekeeping force to suspend its patrols in that part of the zone of conflict. In order to minimize the possibility of incidents, the CIS peacekeeping force also reduced its patrols in the security zone during the election period.

30. On 14 December, a journalist and a camera crew from a Georgian television station went to shoot footage on the Inguri bridge after obtaining the permission from the CIS peacekeeping force check post at the Zugdidi end of the bridge. On their way back, the journalist and the camera crew passed through the same check post, where they continued to film. The CIS peacekeeping force personnel stated that taking pictures was not allowed on military premises and, as the camera kept filming, started to push the journalists out of the post. Some push and shove took place before the journalists left the post after having thrown election-related leaflets around it. Part of the event was later aired on Georgian television and the CIS peacekeeping force personnel were accused of misconduct. The Georgian authorities requested UNOMIG to conduct an investigation. The investigation concluded that there was a well-known prohibition on filming within military premises; that the CIS peacekeeping force had not interfered with the activities of the journalists outside the post; that the altercation had not resulted in bodily harm to any of the journalists; and that minor damage to the equipment during the scuffle had not prevented it from functioning and continuous filming. UNOMIG noted that there had been several cases on previous days when Georgian television journalists went to CIS peacekeeping force posts to film and distribute election material.

31. During the reporting period, the de facto Abkhaz authorities claimed that the strength of the Georgian law enforcement agencies in the security zone had increased up to 2,000, far beyond the agreed level of 600. The strength of law enforcement agencies in the security zone on both sides of the ceasefire line was last verified jointly by UNOMIG and CIS peacekeeping force before the Kodori special operation of July 2006. Accurate monitoring is an exercise that requires cooperation by all sides and an atmosphere of trust. As described in the present report, such conditions hardly exist at present. Taking into account these limitations, UNOMIG observers in the Zugdidi sector remained focused on the issue but have not reported, during the period under review, any apparent change in the overall level of the Georgian law enforcement personnel. Given the population of the Zugdidi district, which is much larger than that of the Gali district, and the fact that the area of responsibility of police precincts does not coincide with the boundaries of the security zone, precise determination of the number of Georgian law enforcement personnel strength may not be possible. It may be in excess of 600 but not in alarming proportions.

32. During the reporting period, UNOMIG continued to observe routine movements towards the upper Kodori Valley by Ministry of Internal Affairs personnel and vehicles, consisting mainly of logistical vehicles travelling through the end of October in preparation for the winter season. Movement through the security zone decreased from November because of deteriorating road conditions. Fewer over-flights over the security zone were observed, because, in the Mission's understanding, the Georgian side is using alternative air routes to reach the Kodori Valley. UNOMIG issued 12 violation reports, for the most part involving isolated military vehicles observed on route M-27 or in the town of Zugdidi. The agreed

procedures for notification and verification of movements through the security zone to and from upper Kodori Valley, in most cases were not followed by the Georgian side during the reporting period.

33. Criminal incidents reported to UNOMIG military observers during the period under review included 3 killings, 1 attempted killing, 6 robberies and 13 abductions.

34. The United Nations police held 52 training courses in crime scene management, domestic violence, riot and crowd control, self-defence, suspect management, traffic police matters, weapon handling and other vital policing skills, with a total participation of 506 Georgian law enforcement officers. From 2 to 4 October, United Nations police and the Human Rights Office organized a training seminar on the protection of women from sexual exploitation in post-conflict societies in Batumi. Thirty participants, including Georgian law enforcement officers, civil servants and nine non-governmental organizations, attended the training seminar. On 5 October, United Nations police facilitated a round-table discussion in Batumi on human trafficking, which was attended by experts from the Ministries of Internal Affairs of Georgia, the Russian Federation and Ukraine, and experts from the Turkish Ministry of Justice, the office of the Georgian Ombudsman and non-governmental organizations. The United Nations police facilitated the participation of 10 Georgian police officers in a training course in crime prevention in Poland from 21 to 28 October. United Nations police arranged a training course from 20 to 23 November in Zugdidi, conducted by Georgian and Ukrainian experts, on prevention of juvenile delinquency and domestic violence for Georgian law enforcement officers, civil servants and non-governmental organizations.

35. United Nations police conducted 38 joint patrols with local law enforcement officers within the Security Zone and 166 monitoring visits to local police facilities to assess the performance of local law enforcement agencies and provide them with expert advice. Eight sets of forensic and police tactical equipment were donated to the local police. Three sets of law-related reference books were handed over to the libraries of the local law enforcement agencies. In October, construction was started on a model police station with a training facility in Lia village with funding from the European Union. An agreement for cooperation in implementing a road safety programme was concluded between UNOMIG and the Government of Lithuania in November.

Kodori Valley

36. The UNOMIG team based in Adjara maintained its patrolling in both the Georgian-controlled upper Kodori Valley and the Abkhaz-controlled lower Kodori Valley. It continued to report no presence of heavy weapons throughout the Valley. The Georgian Ministry of Internal Affairs reported its strength in the upper Kodori Valley at 578 personnel as of mid-November. While UNOMIG was not able to verify the exact personnel strength, contrary to claims by the Abkhaz side it has not encountered indicators of significant reinforcement or introduction of military equipment in the upper Kodori Valley. At the same time, UNOMIG has observed construction of additional infrastructure, especially accommodation and storage facilities.

Mission-wide developments

37. Weekly quadripartite meetings remained suspended. The Joint Fact-Finding Group has nine cases open, four of which are awaiting closure. The focus remains the investigation into the disappea.ance of Davit Sigua (see S/2007/182, para. 15). In this regard, the Group had held six meetings as at 24 December 2007. The investigation was on hold between mid-September and mid-December owing to the unavailability of some important witnesses and UNOMIG involvement in other high profile incidents, including the Bokhundjara incident of 20 September.

38. The UNOMIG Fact-Finding Team completed its independent investigation into the 20 September deadly armed incident between the Abkhaz and Georgian sides at Bokhundjara in the Tqkvarcheli region (see S/2007/588, para. 18). Further to the progress report provided to the Security Council on 12 October, the investigation was able to establish the following:

(a) The incident took place at approximately 300 metres on the Abkhaz side of the administrative border;

(b) Regarding the circumstances of the killing of the two former Russian officers who were leading the group, the report of the UNOMIG medical forensic expert, the fact that none of the interviewees, from the Georgian and Abkhaz side, pointed to a deliberate execution of the two men and the certainty that no shooting took place after the clash ended led the Fact Finding Team to conclude that the two officers died as a result of shooting at close and point-blank range in a close-quarter battle environment;

(c) With regard to the circumstances of the clash, the Georgian side claimed that it was a result of an operation directed against a subversive group operating on Georgian-controlled territory, while the Abkhaz side claimed that it was an unprovoked attack against a group of de facto border guard trainees. While not in a possession of compelling evidence, the Fact-Finding Team has concluded that inconsistencies in the testimonies of Abkhaz personnel interviewed in Tbilisi and Sukhumi, as well as some details of their activities had led to the assumption that there might have been Abkhaz operational activities going on that were unrelated to the activities of the group that came under attack. At the same time, judging from the lack of service experience and professional knowledge, and the demeanour of the Abkhaz group involved in the clash, as well as their lack of long-range communication assets, the Fact-Finding Team deemed it improbable that this particular group had participated in special operations on the Georgian-controlled side.

39. In my previous report, I mentioned that a feasibility study was ongoing with respect to recommendations made by UNOMIG concerning the strengthening of its observation capacity. A technical team from United Nations Headquarters visited the Mission's area of responsibility in October and made a number of proposals concerning the use of unmanned aerial vehicles, weapons locating radars and sound-ranging systems. In its resolution 1781 (2007), the Security Council requested me to continue to explore options for the implementation of the UNOMIG recommendations and to inform the Council accordingly.

40. The technical team's findings have been further analysed by UNOMIG. In relation to the sound-ranging systems, the Mission has established that owing to the inherent limitations of the sound-ranging sensors in the mountainous terrain of the

Kodori Valley, as well as considerations of security, personnel and cost, the efficacy and survivability of this system, especially through the winters, are questionable. In respect of weapons locating radars, terrain difficulties and inaccessibility during winter months will also limit the radar systems' coverage of the Kodori Valley. Moreover, even with the number of radars required (two to three sets of military radars at each one of the two to three sites) and the trained personnel required for their 24-hour operation, the capacity of the system to ensure all-round coverage of the required areas and attain its goals is yet to be confirmed.

41. Against this background, and while further exploration of the weapons locating radars will continue, unmanned aerial vehicles appear as the single most capable, versatile and cost effective way of improving UNOMIG capability of implementing its mandate. A set of medium-sized, long-endurance unmanned aerial vehicles could to a certain degree also meet the objectives sought through the deployment of weapons locating radars and sound-ranging systems.

IV. Cooperation with the Collective Peacekeeping Forces of the Commonwealth of Independent States

42. UNOMIG and CIS peacekeeping forces maintained close cooperation in fulfilling their respective mandates. The CIS peacekeeping force continued to escort UNOMIG through the lower Kodori Valley during regular rotation of personnel for its Kodori Team Base. The CIS peacekeeping force also provided assistance to UNOMIG temporary forward bases, which were established periodically adjacent to CIS peacekeeping force checkpoints on both sides of the ceasefire. With full cooperation and freedom of access from the CIS peacekeeping force, UNOMIG monitored the rotation of units from the Northern Operational Group conducted in December (see para. 20). UNOMIG and CIS peacekeeping forces also conducted a number of joint patrols during the reporting period.

V. Human rights issues

43. During the reporting period, the United Nations Human Rights Office in Abkhazia, Georgia continued its efforts to promote and protect human rights and to provide support to local non-governmental organizations. It continued to conduct regular monitoring visits to detention facilities, monitor court trials and provide legal advisory services to the local population. The Office followed up on individual cases related to illegal occupation of property, housing and property rights, due process and the right to a fair trial, as well as arbitrary detention. Over the reporting period, the Office's city office in Sukhumi received 212 visitors. The majority of the claims of human rights violations related to property rights and were raised by individuals of the most diverse ethnic background.

44. The Human Rights Office continued to support implementation, in cooperation with local non-governmental organizations, of four projects in the areas of domestic violence, free legal assistance, psychological assistance to detainees, and general human rights awareness. Work continued on a project aiming to improve the skills and education of 24 Dranda prison detainees in view of their future reinsertion. The Office, jointly with the United Nations police and the Mission's gender focal point, held a training seminar on the protection of women from sexual exploitation in post-

conflict societies (see para. 34). It continued to work in cooperation with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). OSCE sent two representatives of the Gali-based Human Rights Centre to Warsaw to attend the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting.

VI. Humanitarian and rehabilitation activities

45. Through its Trust Fund, the Mission began construction in October of a new police station and training centre in Lia village in the Zugdidi district, as part of the rehabilitation programme funded by the European Commission. The European Commission has also funded sewage work and electrical line installation for the Ochamchira hospital and the Government of Germany has funded the acquisition of X-ray equipment.

46. At the meeting of the Steering Committee of the rehabilitation programme in the zone of conflict (see para. 5) the Georgian and Abkhaz delegations discussed the implementation of the first phase of the rehabilitation programme and presented an outline of their proposals for further funding. The participants agreed to follow up and hold the next meeting of the Steering Committee in Tbilisi in February 2008.

47. In September, the United Nations country team undertook a comprehensive review of economic and social needs in Abkhazia, Georgia. The World Food Programme (WFP), the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Children's Fund and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations participated in the review team, whose final report will be available at the beginning of 2008. The report will cover the subjects of economy and small enterprises; food security, agriculture production and infrastructure; health; education; social and child protection; protection for the displaced and returnee communities; housing assistance; and confidence-building. The report will provide recommendations for future programming in the region.

48. UNDP continued its livelihood programme with funding from the European Commission and the Government of Norway. During the reporting period, UNDP completed rehabilitation of water supply systems in Tqkvarcheli town and several villages in Gali, Ochamchira and Tqkvarcheli districts. These projects improved access and quality of water for some 9,200 people. Sustainability of the projects is promoted through maintenance training of water operators and support in developing a fee collection system. Business planning training was provided for representatives of the 680 farmers UNDP has been supporting since 2005. With the training, farmers developed business plans for their community groups. Out of the 32 plans developed, 12 were awarded by UNDP with further inputs, such as tractors and green houses. UNDP has also, through Save the Children, rehabilitated incinerators at three district hospitals and provided laboratory equipment and training to health staff. The trained doctors and nurses were overwhelmed by the opportunity to enhance their skills, particularly as many of them have not received any training since the early 1990s.

49. At the initiative of the State Ministry of Georgia on Conflict Resolution Issues, a high-level interministerial working group was created in order to discuss in a coordinated manner with UNHCR the agency's programme and involvement in Abkhazia, Georgia, including the implementation of the agreed strategic directions

for confidence-building (Security Council resolution 1781 (2007), para. 15). The working group is composed of representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry on Conflict Resolution Issues and the Ministry for Refugees and Accommodation. In December, Abkhaz de facto authorities confirmed their commitment to the implementation of the UNHCR strategic directions in the course of discussion with UNHCR. In this context, I stress the calls to both sides made by the Security Council in its two recent resolutions (see resolutions 1752 (2007), para. 9, and 1781 (2007), para. 15) to implement the strategic directions for the return of refugees and displaced persons in the first instance to the Gali region.

50. In the framework of this strategy, UNHCR, together with its implementing partners, continued to work on confidence-building projects encompassing agricultural assistance, community centres, vocational training, school rehabilitations and awareness-raising, which included such topics as the sexual and gender-based violence and HIV/AIDS. The Danish Refugee Council and the Norwegian Refugee Council have progressed in implementing their respective projects in the sectors of shelter, community mobilization, micro-grant, school and community infrastructure rehabilitations and legal assistance. The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation has also continued its support to the strategic direction during the reporting period.

51. United Nations agencies and international non-governmental organizations continued to assist vulnerable groups affected by the conflict on the Abkhaz side of the ceasefire line. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) continued supporting a project aimed at improving the quality of services in the area of reproductive health, which was executed by a local non-governmental organization in close collaboration with the AIDS Centre in Sukhumi, and in coordination with the Georgian-Abkhaz Coordinating Commission. Almost 110 reproductive health service providers, general practitioners and nurses received training in providing reproductive health services. To support the operations of the Reproductive Health Centre in Sukhumi, UNFPA supplied contraceptives and basic reproductive medical health equipment. Some 800 copies of a popular book for young mothers, which includes information on reproductive health issues and infant care, were printed and distributed in Abkhazia, Georgia.

52. WFP, in collaboration with World Vision International and Médecins Sans Frontières, implemented food-for-work, food-for-education and tuberculosis projects in the region. Over 12,700 people from 17 communities of the Gali, Ochamchira and Tqkvarcheli districts participated in food-for-work projects aimed at rehabilitating basic agricultural infrastructure. Following the rehabilitation of degraded land plots and the uprooting of underproductive tea plantations, beneficiaries received access to an additional 160 hectares of arable land. In addition, WFP approved an income generating project on establishing fish farms in six villages of the Gali and Ochamchira districts. The WFP food-for-education programme covered 82 schools, providing take-home rations to over 1,000 most at-risk schoolchildren. In cooperation with Médecins Sans Frontières, food was also provided to 70 tuberculosis patients in the Gulripsh hospital.

VII. Support issues

53. During the reporting period, UNOMIG continued its HIV/AIDS prevention and awareness campaign. On 30 November, World AIDS Day was observed mission-wide. The local communities participated in World AIDS Day events, and Mission personnel raised funds to benefit the needy in the Mission's area of operations. The UNOMIG German Medical Team together with the HIV/AIDS Task Force continued to facilitate distribution of materials.

54. Through its gender focal point, UNOMIG continued to sensitize its personnel on gender issues both through regular broadcasts and on the occasion of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women on 25 November. During the reporting period, incoming uniformed and civilian personnel were briefed on gender equality in peacekeeping. The Mission also distributed a brochure produced by United Nations Action against Sexual Violence in Conflict in support of the UNOMIG-sponsored seminar on the protection of women from sexual exploitation in post-conflict societies (see para. 34).

55. A Conduct and Discipline Unit was constituted in August 2007, and the Mission has developed a risk assessment tool for misconduct by UNOMIG staff as well as a strategy for internal and public awareness. All Mission members, both local and international, have completed a certified standards of conduct training course, and an electronic library has been made available to all UNOMIG staff containing guidelines on conduct and discipline issues.

VIII. Observations

56. During the period under review no incident took place between the Georgian and Abkhaz sides. No further confrontation took place between Georgian security forces and the CIS peacekeeping force after their very serious stand-off on 30 October. Unfortunately, against this positive background, a string of allegations concerning either the deployment of forces on both sides of the ceasefire line or incidents involving the Abkhaz forces or the CIS peacekeeping force generated tensions and, occasionally, alarm in the zone of conflict and beyond. A measure of disinformation is understandable and unavoidable in an environment where real apprehensions exist, suspicions abound and means of independent verification are scarce. But such disconnect, as illustrated in the present report, between, on the one hand, realities on the ground and, on the other hand, media or official statements, is a matter of concern. As it is, an "image of the enemy" is already pervasive among communities on both sides of the ceasefire line. Fanning fears and hostility through misrepresentation will only entrench it further, and make harder the restoration of confidence that is a stated objective of the sides. The Security Council has repeatedly called upon the sides to exercise restraint. I urge restraint in this respect as well. In addition, from a conflict-prevention viewpoint, one side's false allegations can only raise the other side's suspicion that preparations for the use of force are afoot, and lead it to take countermeasures, thus triggering a potentially dangerous escalation. With limited resources, UNOMIG has made strenuous efforts to verify as many reports as possible concerning events in its area of responsibility. The Mission will continue to do so and I propose that its findings should be fully taken into account by the sides.

57. The issue of UNOMIG resources and capabilities has come into sharper focus since 2006, when tensions between the two sides shifted once again to the Kodori Valley, an area where the difficult terrain and security risks combine to undermine the effectiveness of foot and vehicular patrols. The feasibility studies carried out in the wake of the 11 March incident point to the fact that, without prejudice to further study, unmanned aerial vehicles are clearly the most effective and most efficient way of enabling the Mission to fulfil its observation mandate with maximum safety for its personnel. Because it is a powerful technology, questions have been raised, particularly by the Abkhaz side, about possible misuse outside the Mission's mandate. UNOMIG is working on standard operating procedures designed precisely to address such concerns. I should add that, beyond the issue of the Kodori Valley, the upgrading of UNOMIG observation tools addresses an almost decade-old gap between the Mission's mandate and its capabilities. Indeed, while under the Moscow Agreement the mandate of United Nations military observers covers the monitoring of the zone of conflict, its coastal waters and airspace, as well as the Kodori Valley, since the downing of a UNOMIG helicopter over the valley in 2001 the Mission has been restricted to foot and vehicular patrols, as mentioned above, with their inherent limitations. Plugging the capability gap will make UNOMIG more apt to fulfil the conflict prevention side of its mandate.

58. This is not to say that the conflict settlement aspect of the mandate does not deserve attention. The present report, like many previous such reports, shows the political process at a standstill. Worse, reliable observers on both sides of the ceasefire line have commented that the relationship between the two sides was in 2007 at its lowest point since the large-scale violence of 1998. The two electoral campaigns that took place in 2007, for the Georgian presidency and the de facto Abkhaz parliament, illustrated once again the deep rift between the political aspirations of the sides and their constituencies, with reunification and independence seen as top, non-negotiable priorities in Tbilisi and Sukhumi, respectively, and promoted with an equal sense of urgency. Against this background, the United Nations has followed essentially the "confidence-building" approach described in paragraph 3 above, based on the premise that a successful dialogue on security, the return of internally displaced persons and refugees, economic rehabilitation and humanitarian issues would help bring about a comprehensive political settlement of the conflict. For its part, the Government of Georgia has more and more made the case vocally that progress could only be achieved through an in-depth revision of the peacekeeping, and, to a lesser extent, the negotiation formats. The Abkhaz leadership has, for its part, strenuously objected to any change in the peacekeeping format while expressing, at times, its own misgivings about what it views as biases in the involvement of the international community. It has been clear for some time that major differences about the desired goal of the peace process are thus compounded by stark disagreements about the process itself. I see in this conjuncture an opportunity for the Secretariat to undertake an assessment of the peace process, on that basis, and with the support of the Group of Friends, to stem the downward trend that the process seems to be following and to put it on firmer tracks.

59. I conclude by expressing my thanks to my Special Representative and the staff of UNOMIG for their persistent efforts in a volatile environment; to the Group of Friends, whose involvement is essential to the viability of my own efforts; and to the many Member States and international organizations that continue to contribute to the peace process.

Annex

Countries providing military observers (as at 1 January 2008)

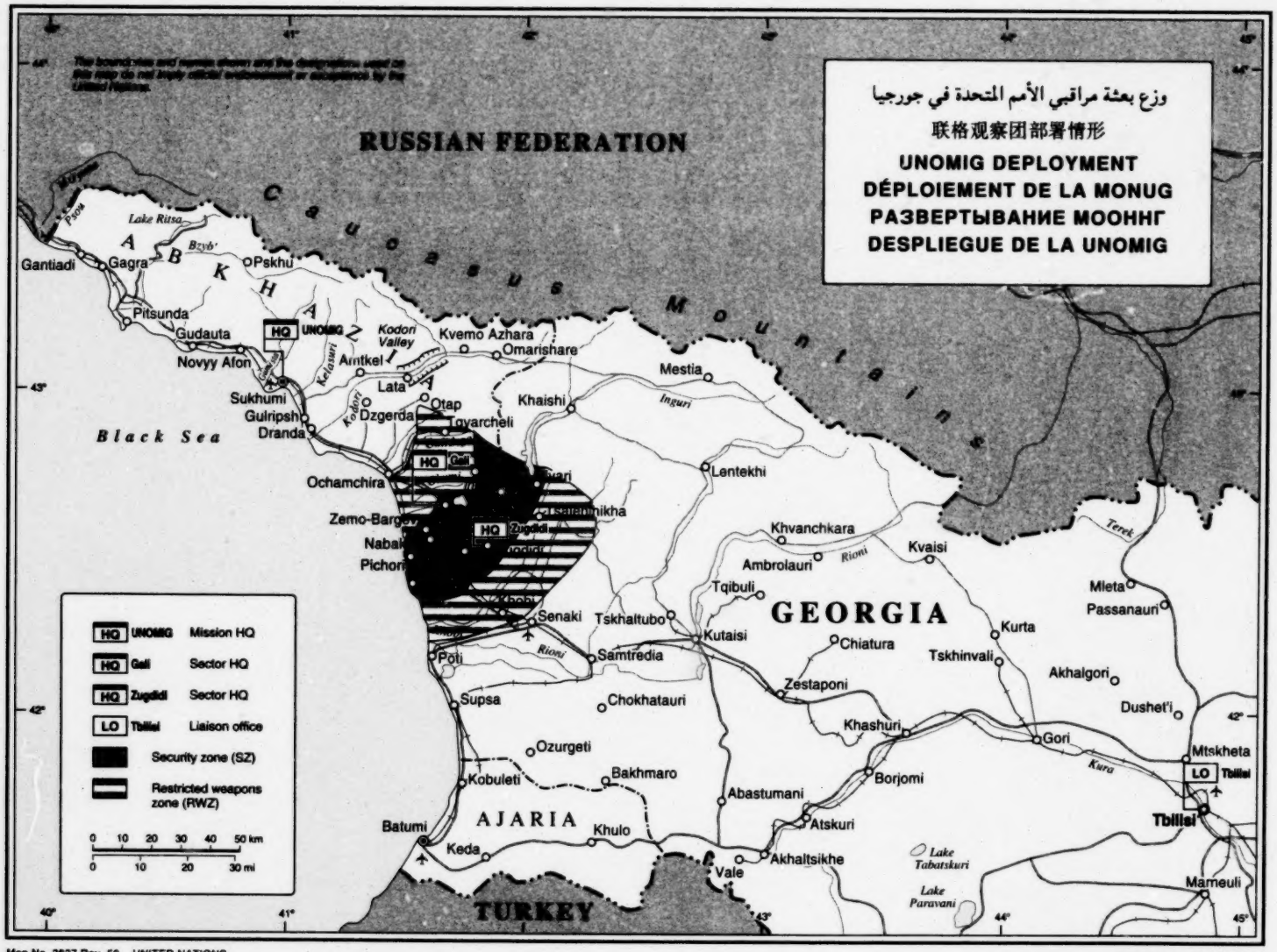
Country	*Military observers*
Albania	3
Austria	2
Bangladesh	8
Croatia	3
Czech Republic	5
Denmark	5
Egypt	6
France	3
Germany	12
Ghana	1
Greece	5
Hungary	7
Indonesia	4
Jordan	7
Lithuania	2
Moldova	1
Mongolia	1
Nepal	1
Nigeria	1
Pakistan	11[a]
Poland	4
Republic of Korea	7
Romania	2
Russian Federation	4
Sweden	3
Switzerland	4
Turkey	5
Ukraine	5
United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	5
United States of America	2
Uruguay	3
Yemen	1
Total	**133**

[a] Including the Chief Military Observer.

Countries providing civilian police personnel (as at 1 January 2008)

Country	*Civilian police*
Czech Republic	2
Germany	5
Ghana	1
Philippines	2
Poland	2
Russian Federation	2
Sweden	2
Switzerland	2
Ukraine	1[a]
Total	**19**

[a] Including the Senior Police Adviser.



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